

Open Research Online

The Open University's repository of research publications and other research outputs

The impact of architecture and space on understanding historical progress at the Museum of London

Other

How to cite:

Aylett, Sam (2020). The impact of architecture and space on understanding historical progress at the Museum of London. Postgraduate Research Poster Competition, The Open University.

For guidance on citations see [FAQs](#).

© [not recorded]



<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

Version: Poster

Copyright and Moral Rights for the articles on this site are retained by the individual authors and/or other copyright owners. For more information on Open Research Online's data [policy](#) on reuse of materials please consult the policies page.

oro.open.ac.uk

The impact of architecture and space on understanding historical progress at the Museum of London

Samuel Paul Tobias Aylett, History/Art History

Thesis: The Museum of London 1976-2007: Reimagining Metropolitan Narratives in Postcolonial London

Supervisors: Prof Karl Hack & Dr Susie West

LONDON THE IMPERIAL CITY

In 1991, Francis Sheppard, the Museum of London's biographer, described the Museum of London's permanent galleries as 'the first big comprehensive exhibition of the development of a geographical area from the earliest times to the present.' [1] The Museum's narrative of London's development strongly resembled a 'Whig' interpretation of history, a phrase coined by the Cambridge don, Herbert Butterfield, in his 1931 volume entitled *The Whig Interpretation of History*. Such interpretation emphasized '...principles of progress in the past and to produce a story which is the [...] glorification of the present.' The 1976 Museum of London permanent galleries took the visitor on a journey which emphasised progress from London's pre-history to early twentieth century. *The Imperial London gallery - with its popular imperial imagery and interpretation - stood as the apogee within this teleological narrative; a golden-age.* Displays such as 'Victorian Imperialism' in which can be seen an officer's uniform, a bust of Queen Victoria and decorated with Union Jack flags, cemented the idea of London as an Imperial city and one which grew to become a city 'larger and wealthier than many sovereign states'. *This journey of progress from London's pre-history to London as a powerful imperial centre was shaped in-part by the layout and architecture of the Museum. How does space and architecture assert power over the visitor viewing experience and understanding of history at the Museum?*



Figure 13: 'Victorian Imperialism' display, 'Imperial London' gallery, 1976. Source: Francis Sheppard, *A Treasury of London's Past* (London: HMSO, 1991), p. 160. Contains public sector information licensed under the Open Government Licence v3.0.

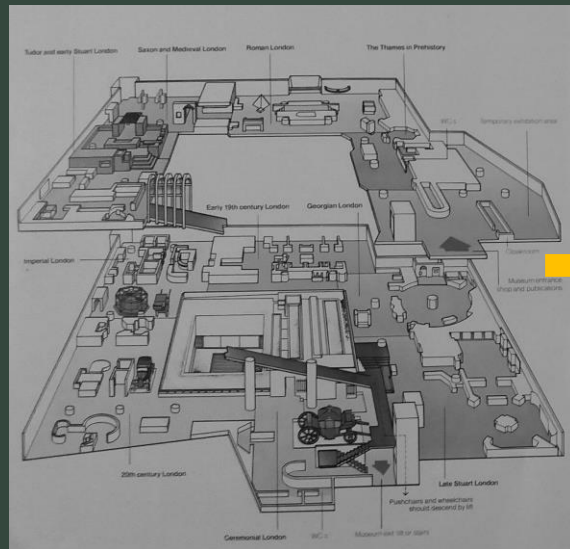


Figure 9: Museum of London permanent galleries floor plan, 1976. Source: London Metropolitan Archives CLA/076/01/016, *Museum of London: Guide 1976*.

HOW SPACE AND LAYOUT AFFECT THE VIEWING EXPERIENCE.

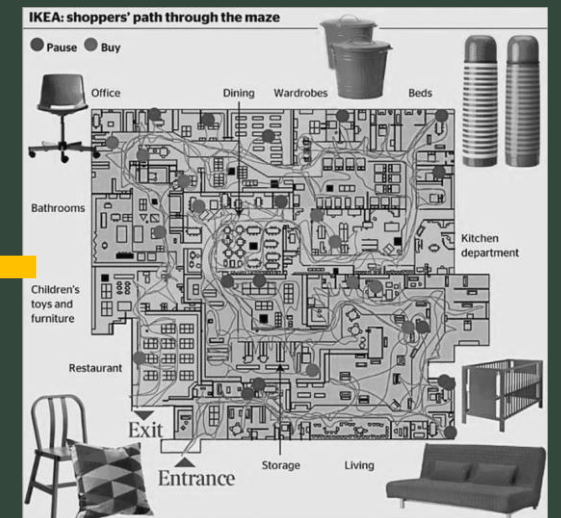
1. The *timeline has been a 'natural' and 'intuitive' way of presenting the past*, 'As you move from the beginning to then end of an exhibition, you move, in a metaphorical way, from [...] the beginning of a story to the end. The timeline provides a powerful framework for presenting history.' [2]
2. *'The experiential narrative that a museum embodies is inseparable from its physical condition* – its architecture. Architecture [...] constructs the framework of the visitors' experience.' [3]

A SIDEWAY GLANCE AT IKEA...

Many of us have experienced Ikea. Ikea's visitor route is designed like that of a museum, '...to keep customers inside the store for the maximum time possible. They achieve this by setting a route round the store from which it's difficult to deviate. Taking the shortcuts (which are only there to conform with fire regulations) often leaves you adrift in a sea of lampshades.' [4]

THE MUSEUM OF LONDON LAYOUT AND SPACE

The upper level of the Museum was experienced as an L-shaped plan, circulating the visitor to the main descent route to the lower level, which is structured as a complete circuit This architectural approach was 'simple and clear [...] and fully recognises the essential characteristic of museum viewing: that it is a linear sequence, which demands continuity.' [5] Similar to Ikea, visitors would have found it difficult to deviate from the set route, encouraged to follow London's historical progress in a linear way. *The way in which the architecture and space engendered a Whiggish narrative further emphasised a history of the development of London which underscored continual progress with Imperial London as the golden-age; its apogee.*



Ikea visitor route within the maze-like Ikea store.
Source: Steven Poon, 'Designing Brand Culture Based on the Advertising's New Medium of Human Experience: Integrating the Application in Lifestyle Retailing Strategy' *International Journal of Media, Journalism and Mass Communications (IJMJC)* Volume 2, Issue 2, 2016, PP 8-15.

[1] Francis Sheppard, *A Treasury of London's Past* (HMSO: London, 1991).

[2] Steven Lubar, 'Timelines in Exhibitions', *Curator: The Museum Journal*, Vol. 56, No. 2, (April 2013), p. 169.

[3] Susanna Sirefman, 'Formed and Forming: Contemporary Museum Architecture', *Daedalus*, Vol. 128, No. 3, (1999), p. 297.

[4] Ian Tucker, 'Adrift in a shopping maze: it's a successful no-exit strategy', *The Guardian* (January 2011), <https://www.theguardian.com/business/2011/jan/30/ikea-like-a-maze-ian-tucker>, accessed 01st May 2020.

[5] Michael Brawne, '1977 July: The Museum of London by Powell and Moya', *The Architectural Review*, Online, (24th February 2012), [online], <<https://www.architectural-review.com/essays/viewpoints/1977-july-the-museum-of-london-by-powell-and-moya/8626069.article>>, accessed 05th May 2020.